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SUBJECT: YASENI PICKS UP SUPPORT FOR PRESIDENTIAL BID

REF: KABUL 244

Classified By: Acting PolCouns Stacy Nichols for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Lower House 1st Deputy Speaker Mirwais Yaseni (Nangarhar, Pashtun) is attracting support for his presidential bid from some fellow parliamentarians. Lower House 2nd Deputy Speaker and United Front member Ammanullah Payman (Badakhshan, Tajik) told PolOff the UF's inability to settle on a strong challenger to Karzai had forced him into "outside the box thinking." Payman believes Karzai can likely defeat any UF candidate by rallying his Pashtun base with the help of southern tribal leaders. To counter Karzai's strength, Payman insists the opposition must unite around a Pashtun from a tribe other than Karzai's Popalzai. In Yaseni, Payman sees a candidate with a Pashtun base in Jalalabad, but also a history of working with a multi-ethnic assortment of MPs and, at times, the UF. "This country cannot afford another Popalzai president," Payman said. "Yaseni is the best person to beat Karzai."

¶2. (C) Lower House MP Qadria Ebrahim Yasdanparast (Kabul, Tajik), the only woman on the UF's 50-some person executive committee, said she too has been frustrated by the UF core leadership's inability to identify a strong candidate. Independently of Payman, she told PolOff she was considering supporting Yaseni's campaign, in part because of Yaseni's reputation as a consensus builder in Parliament. Yaseni earlier told PolOff he believed most of the 135 MPs who supported his re-election as deputy speaker in January would back his campaign (reftel). We doubt Yaseni can count on support from all of these MPs, but he is one of the few Pashtun MPs to forge genuine alliances with Tajik, Hazara, and Uzbek MPs. Some 20 MPs, including Yaseni, belong to the unofficial Republic Party, which has occasionally served as an ersatz political party for Karzai (the president has refused to join or form a party of his own). Yaseni now says most Republic Party MPs will back his candidacy. Party leaders like Abdul Qayum Sajadi (Ghazni, Hazara) have hinted they no longer support Karzai's re-election and are ready to support Yaseni. The pro-reform Third Line faction's 15 MPs may be another source of support for Yaseni.

¶3. (C) Yaseni has slowly rolled out his campaign since first telling us of his intentions a few months ago. He has held off on a major media event to "officially" declare his candidacy until the current debate over post-5/22 presidential continuity is resolved. In the meantime, though, he has spoken publicly of his intention to run in the media and has lobbied heavily for the support of fellow politicians. Interest in his candidacy has not gone unnoticed by the country's political elite, as Yaseni has become a more frequent participant in closed-door meetings usually attended by Afghanistan's traditional political leaders to discuss the country's hot-button political issues.

¶4. (C) Yaseni enjoys a positive reputation in Parliament as a consensus builder and effective manager; however, he has had difficulty standing up to mujahideen MPs during parliamentary debates. His non-military background makes him an attractive

candidate for other MPs frustrated by mujahideen leaders and their backroom negotiations that undermine Parliament's role and, some believe, subvert Afghanistan's young democracy. Given Parliament's weakness as an institution and most MPs' own inexperience in politics, it's unclear how many votes an MP's endorsement will translate to on election day. Also unknown is whether Yaseni can convince his supporters in the UF to go public and withstand the likely backlash from Lower House Speaker Yunus Qanooni. In order to become a serious threat to Karzai, Yaseni will need to prove that his candidacy has resonance outside the halls of Parliament and among the larger population.

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